

# Introduction

In September and October of 1989, the United States experienced two of the worst natural disasters in its history: Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta earthquake. The dramatic story of the earthquake response must be placed against the backdrop of Hurricane Hugo. Hugo, one of the most devastating and costly hurricanes to affect the United States, began pounding the Virgin Islands on 17 September 1989 with winds exceeding 140 miles an hour. After crossing St. Croix and Puerto Rico, it ravaged the Carolinas. While the nation was still reeling from the storm on 17 October 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake struck northern California.

The Loma Prieta earthquake touched the lives of 10 times the number of people affected in an “average” disaster to which the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) responds, and federal outlay for the earthquake was 20 to 30 times the norm. In addition, the earthquake occurred 3,000 miles from the resources assembled to respond to Hurricane Hugo.

Federal, state, and local agencies faced severe challenges as they struggled to provide essential services and supplies for the disaster victims in California. The state and local governments, which have primary responsibility for disaster response, were quickly overwhelmed; and the resources of many federal agencies were brought to bear. The Department of Defense and the Corps of Engineers responded quickly and aggressively. The Corps not only performed its traditional role of conducting damage surveys and administering contracts as it had after Hurricane Hugo, it also took on new missions such as inspecting private homes for damage and delivering rental assistance checks.

The Corps’ response to the Loma Prieta earthquake revealed both strengths and weaknesses and provided valuable lessons for the future. This manuscript traces the Corps’ early response and its efforts to set up an effective organizational

structure. It then describes and evaluates the specific missions that the Corps performed for FEMA and other agencies.

The focus of this manuscript is on Corps operations rather than policy making and implementation at the headquarters level of the Department of the Army or within the Department of Defense. The manuscript does not deal with broader issues of the Department of Defense and the Department of the Army involvement and their organizational structure—such as the roles of the Director of Military Support and the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Logistics, and Environment and the relationship of each to the Corps. Nor does this manuscript deal at length with the role and responsibilities of the disaster control officer who coordinated all Department of Defense support with FEMA officials on site. Further study of the earthquake response focusing on the larger policy issues and structure of the Department of the Army and the Department of Defense involvement awaits the work of another historian.

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